

**CURRENT
CINEMA**



FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S

EMMA TAMMI AND SETH CUDDEBACK
POWER UP THE SCARES

BY DAVID SOMERSET



SPOILER ALERT

MAJOR PLOT POINTS DISCUSSED HEREIN

For the past few decades, movies adapted from video games have largely garnered a reputation for negative reviews and poor box-office results. That has started to shift in recent years, with *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* crossing a billion in earnings, TV's *The Last of Us* nabbing both audience fervor and Emmy nominations and even the latest adaptation of *Mortal Kombat* doing well enough to spawn a sequel. But it wouldn't be fair to say that Universal and horror churning Blumhouse have simply jumped on the bandwagon in search of a quick buck with a take on the genre—their adaptation of *Five Nights at Freddy's* has been in the works for more than a decade.



The film harkens from an indie point-and-click survival horror video game franchise created by Scott Cawthorn—who was on board for its segue to cinema—and first released on IndieDB as a demo on July 24, 2014. The full game was put out that Aug. 8 and arrived on Steam 10 days later. A sequel, *Five Nights at Freddy's 2*, came shortly thereafter, with a slew of others after that, along with global popularity. The goal from its inception was for the player to survive five nights as a watchman at Freddy Fazbear's Pizzeria while avoiding getting caught, killed and stuffed into a mascot costume by Chuck E. Cheese-style haunted animatronic characters. In true night-watchman fashion, the player stays alive by tracking the animatronic characters' movements via the restaurant's security cameras.

Inspired by feedback on his previous game, the kid-friendly *Chipper & Sons Lumber Co.*, whose jerky main characters were described as disturbing for a family-friendly title, Cawthorn opted to lean into the fright for *Freddy's*, which was more of a slow-burn hit whose word of mouth spread among YouTube gamers as a fervent fanbase sprang to life. Warner Bros. was the first to try and tap into the sequels and media/merchandising empire, announcing in April 2015 it had acquired the series' film rights, with Seth Grahame-Smith (*Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*) producing and Cawthorn on hand to shepherd any movie based on his creation. Gil Kenan (*Monster House*) signed on to direct, but by 2017 the rights were back up for grabs, with Cawthorn blaming development delays for the project landing back at square one. Before long, it was set up at Blumhouse and had Chris Columbus rewriting the script to direct it. Yet despite the presence of the man who wrote *Gremlins*, the storyline proved to be a tough nut to crack, requiring years more in development.

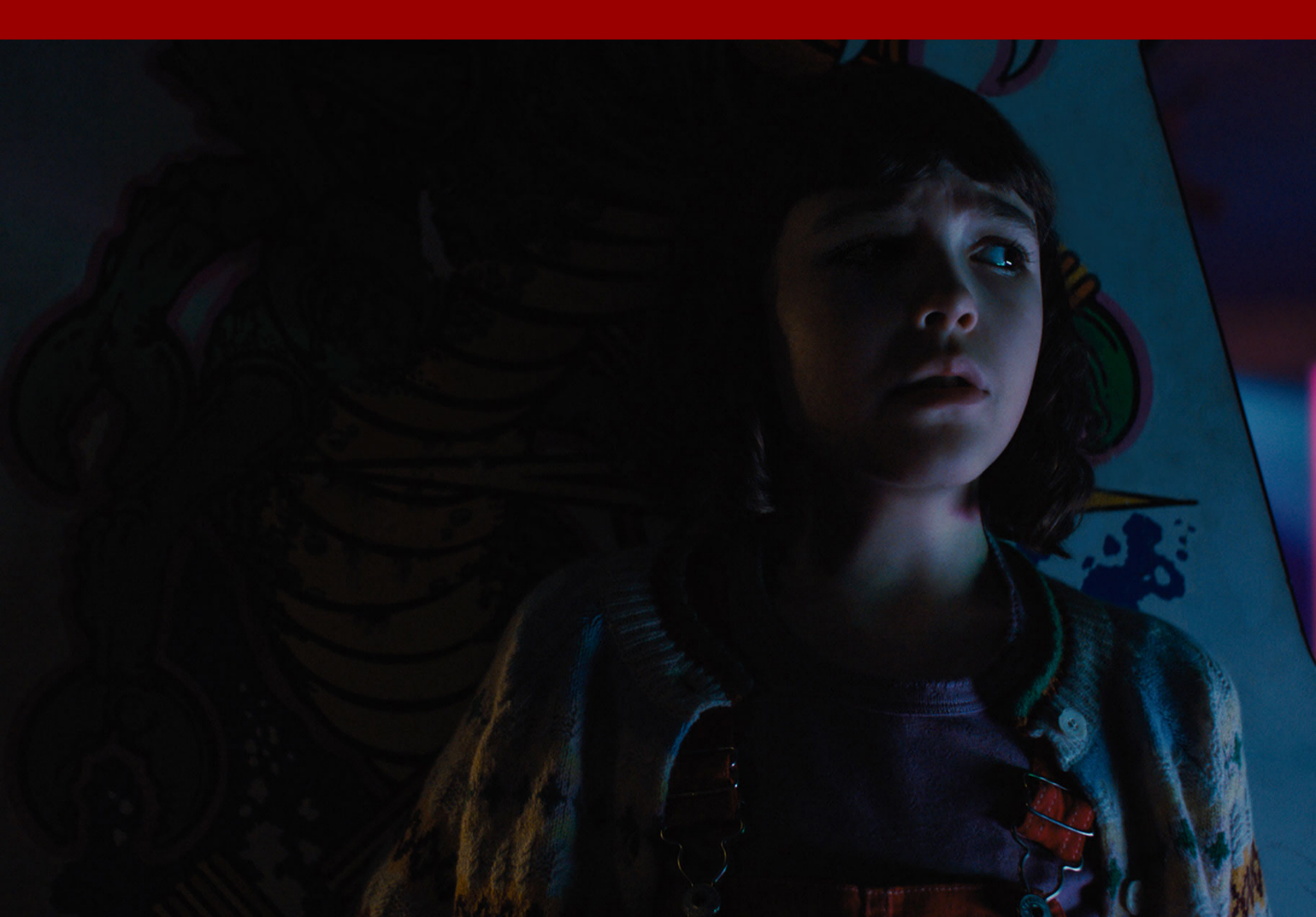




By the time Emma Tammi (2018 otherworldly horror western *The Wind*) was brought in to direct and rewrite the script based on a successful pitch meeting with Cawthorn and the Blumhouse team, things had started to look hopeless. “It had been through a bunch of drafts, and though Scott engaged with a bunch of different directors, nothing had quite worked out,” Tammi says of her initial conversations. “And I think, not to sound bleak, but there was a little bit of a feeling of, *Okay, this might never happen. Go ahead, take your shot on the script, and we’ll go from there.*” Various filmmakers had submitted their ideas to expand the game’s concept into movie form, but it was Tammi’s take on the emotional inner life of the main character, Mike (Josh Hutcherson), that landed her the gig.

Moving forward, Tammi collaborated with Cawthorn on what he wanted in the movie, with leeway to develop her own thoughts beyond that while working with the creator and writer Seth Cuddeback on his first produced script. “Scott was working on a version of the script before Seth and I came on board, and that was really the blueprint we were referencing for the story points he felt were the most important backbone pieces. But we were also trying to figure ways to pull out some of the potential in the story by giving the characters more depth and trying to heighten the humor and the scares. For me, the heart of the story was so clearly Mike and Abby’s [Piper Rubio] journey together as siblings struggling to get past a really, really difficult time in their lives. I was pleasantly surprised it had such an emotional core—that was something I tapped into and was excited to further develop.”





Tammi and Cuddeback fleshed out a story that saw Mike, obsessed with the kidnapping of younger brother Garrett (Lucas Grant) years earlier, looking to experiment with lucid dreaming to learn more about what happened to his sibling. He sees the job at Freddy's as a gig to earn money so he can keep Abby from the clutches of his calculating Aunt Jane (Mary Stuart Masterson) and a place where he can sleep at night as he indulges in his dream investigation. When it turns out the animatronics are hosting the ghosts of dead children who vanished at the rundown pizzeria before it closed, a further connection to his past is formed. Jane, looking for a way to discredit Mike, sends hired thugs to Freddy's during the day to vandalize the place, which ends badly for the criminals. Finally, there is the troubled Abby—shaken by the loss of her mother and departure of her father, who has retreated into a world of drawing and invisible friends—who makes her own connection with the animatronic animals.



Tammi and Cuddeback dug in with Cawthorn to crank out the next draft on a time crunch because of how long development had already lasted. “I was engaging with the scripts more as the director, and I knew what notes and elements I really wanted to address,” says Tammi. “And initially, we did not have much time. I was excited to pull in Seth to help, not just for his fantastic talent but also for speed, because we were going so quickly, initially, on the rewrite. We were all working remotely. Seth and I had our different workstations, Scott was in Texas, and then we’d come back together and share pages and thoughts.” While Cawthorn decided this storyline should stick to the original video game, there were references to the sequels sprinkled in for eagle-eyed fans. “One of the bigger ones was the addition of the Balloon Boy figurine,” notes Cuddeback. “We got into having conversations about finding fun Easter eggs for the fans that could be included and weren’t necessarily a part of the first game they’d be expecting as a welcome and wonderful surprise.”

The result is a cameo from a small Balloon Boy plastic model that acts as both jump scare (when Mike initially encounters it in a locker) and joke (when it pops back up again in at least one incongruous moment). Although this childlike animatronic made it in, not every character wound up in the final cut. One element removed in editing was a dog belonging to Max, Abby’s babysitter (Kat Conner Sterling), who it is revealed is working as a spy for Aunt Jane and accompanies her brother and his lawless buddies on their vandalism attempt at Freddy’s. “We had a dog character in the movie that read well on the page, but we made some trims, and ultimately he didn’t make the cut,” Tammi says. “There were small things like that here and there, but the bulk of the story, and certainly the characters, really all remained in the final movie.”

